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SUBJECT: ESG-1 INTERVENTION ON TAWI TAWI: A TEMPLATE FOR FUTURE CIVIC ACTION EFFORTS

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. The August 9-10 intervention by Expeditionary Strike Group-1 (ESG-1) on Tawi Tawi represents the type of targeted, innovative civil affairs effort needed in the Philippines. We urge US Pacific Command to make these operations a regular part of future ESG and other naval deployments to the region. END SUMMARY.

A VULNERABLE AREA AND TERRORIST HAVEN

¶2. (U) The island of Tawi Tawi is the poorest province of Mindanao, the Philippines' poorest region. It lies amid traditional main smuggling routes in and out of the country. Predominately Muslim, it has in recent years also become a transit point and haven for Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) terrorists.

¶3. (U) A perception of governmental neglect reinforces disaffection and aids Islamist radicals who promise a better life in a transnational Muslim state. Helping the GRP rebuild the ties with its populace is a critical nexus in combating the terrorist threat on the island and in disrupting JI and ASG infiltration routes.

TARGETED CIVIC ACTION PROGRAMS

¶4. (U) The August 9-10 civil/military intervention on Tawi Tawi by ESG-1 consisted of focused medical, dental, and engineering civic action programs (MEDCAPs, DENCAPs, and ENCAPs) targeting the least served members of the community. For two days, medical and engineering personnel from the ESG and 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit joined a team of medical personnel from the Armed Forces of the Philippine's (AFP) Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P), and several non-governmental organizations to treat almost 3000 patients. ESG personnel helped build furniture for two schools, distributed more than 1000 text books, and identified 288 patients for elective surgery (e.g., correcting cleft palates and crossed eyes) by Mabuhay Deseret, the largest surgical charity in the Philippines.

¶5. (U) ESG-1 also distributed several thousand public health brochures, Rewards for Justice handbills, and the US Embassy pamphlet "Muslim Life in the Philippines." Outreach efforts included a live radio interview and visits of local media, educators, and civic leaders aboard ESG vessels.

OVERWHELMINGLY POSITIVE RESPONSE

¶6. (U) The local response was overwhelmingly positive. US military personnel were warmly received, with young people proudly displaying their "Tawi Tawi MEDCAP" T-shirts. During a recent USDAO visit to the island, a cross section of residents continued to rave about the ESG-1's impact.

A TEMPLATE FOR FUTURE INTERVENTIONS

¶7. (U) The success of this effort represents a template that should be duplicated. These types of programs bolster the AFP's own ability to conduct civil/military operations successfully -- one of the objectives of the Philippine Defense Reform program -- as well as help to (re-)establish the links between the Philippine government and people. A well planned series of civic action interventions that is appropriately coordinated with USAID efforts could reinforce the efforts of the JSOTF-P, and, over the longer term, directly and positively impact the counterterrorism fight in the Sulu Archipelago and southern Philippines. We appreciate the efforts of ADM Lefever, the commander of ESG-1, and his sailors and Marines, and highly recommend US Pacific Command consider future efforts targeting this strategic, yet vulnerable area.

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